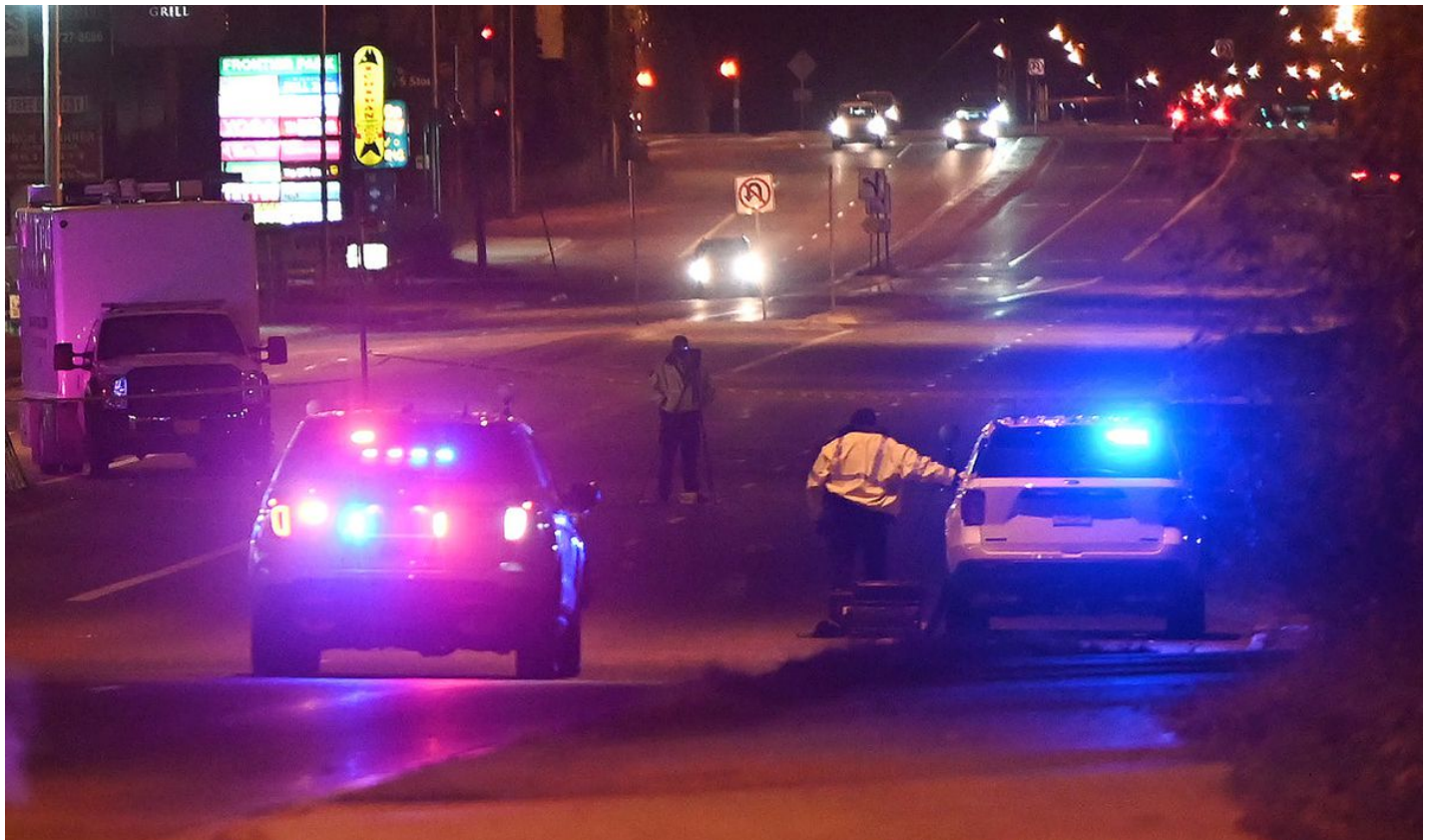


ANCHORAGE DAILY NEWS

Anchorage

A perilous Anchorage intersection — and a season of pedestrian deaths

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Anchorage police investigate the scene of a fatal vehicle-pedestrian collision on East Tudor Road near Wright Street that occurred the evening of Oct. 24, 2020. (Bill Roth / ADN)

In the darkness of a September night, Nina Lebovitz stepped off a median into the whizzing traffic of Anchorage's East Tudor Road. The SUV that hit her had no time to stop.

When she died at an Anchorage hospital the next day, Lebovitz was the seventh pedestrian to be struck and killed by a vehicle on an Anchorage road this year.

Her death came in the midst of a string of autumn pedestrian deaths so grim that police undertook a special patrol, talking to people gathered at busy and dangerous intersections, to try to stop anyone else from being hit on an Anchorage roadway.

Less than a month after Lebovitz died, another woman was killed at the same intersection at Tudor Road and Wright Street, between a rescue mission that serves the homeless and a busy convenience store and, behind that, the Campbell Creek greenbelt. Jenneen Leopold was killed on Oct. 25. She was 26.

The spot has a long history of peril: Since the 1990s, at least five people have died crossing the road there, according to an analysis by the Daily News.

The stretch of Tudor Road from Lake Otis Parkway east to just past Wright Street sees the second greatest concentration of pedestrian crashes in the state, according to Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. Twenty-eight pedestrian collisions happened in the area over a 10-year period.

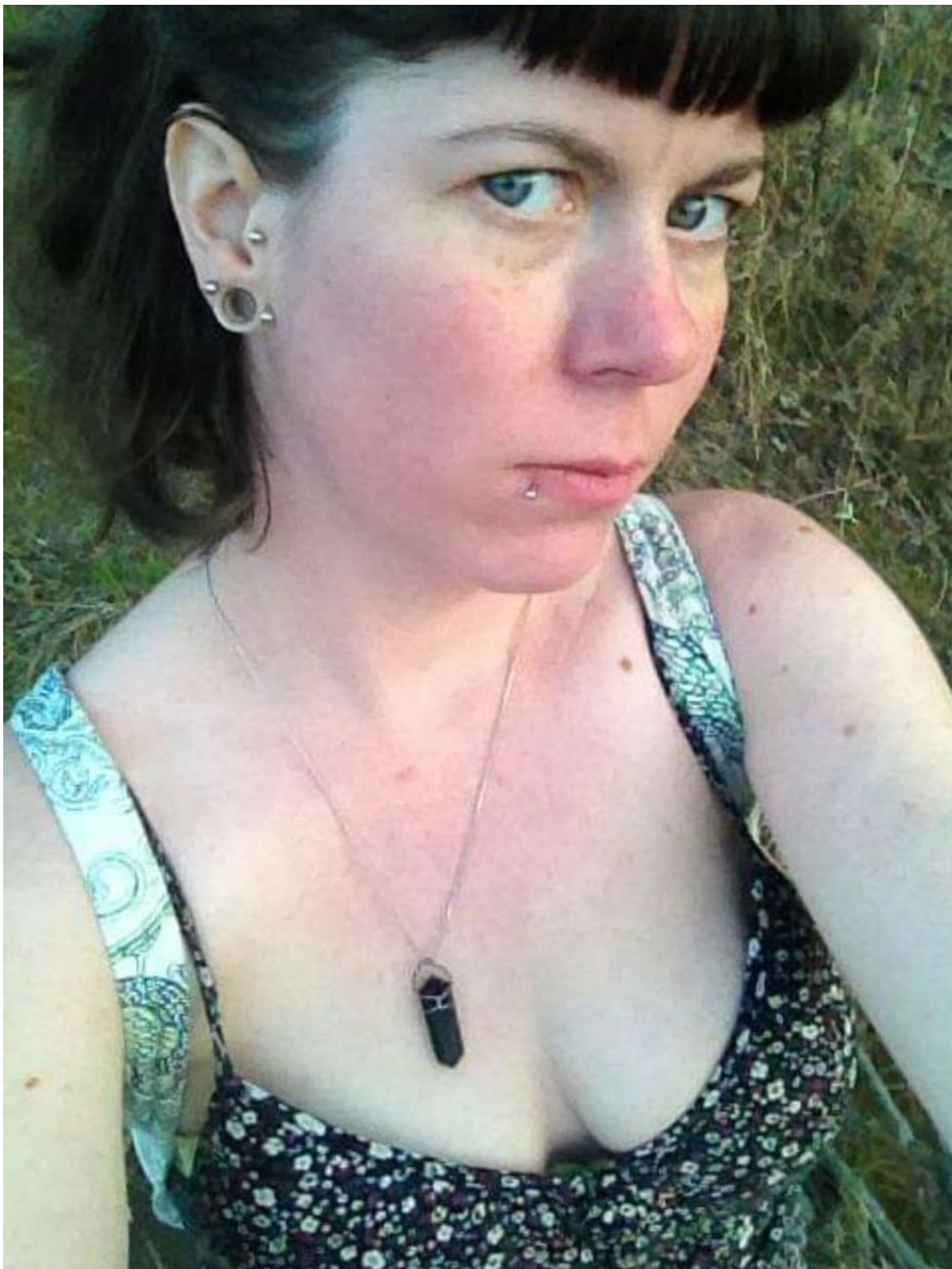
Now some city leaders, including Anchorage Assembly chairman Felix Rivera, say it's time to make the intersection safer.

“To use a gruesome metaphor, we’ve seen the bodies pile up over the years,” Rivera said. “The status quo we’ve existed in for decades isn’t good enough.”

Tudor Road and Wright Street

At first, when police found Nina Lebovitz on Tudor Road, she was a Jane Doe. The 38-year-old had no identification on her, and she’d been homeless for a time before her death, according to her sister.

By the time Anchorage police called sister Tawny Lebovitz in California, Nina had been dead for more than a week.



Nina Lebovitz was killed by a vehicle in Sept. 2020 as she attempted to cross Tudor Road. (Photo courtesy Tawny Lebovitz)

Nina was from Upland, California, west of San Bernardino, her sister said in a phone interview. Nina moved to Alaska around 15 years ago, to be with a boyfriend. She first lived in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough with her kids, whom she adored, Tawny said. She loved cats, birds and her constantly changing hairstyles, and she once

started an organic gardening business. Her recent years, though, had been a maelstrom. She'd lost custody of her children to her ex after a court fight, endured serious surgeries and injuries, and more recently became homeless.

Her sister hadn't heard from her in a long time before the call from Anchorage police, with news that Nina had been hit by a car.

Tawny Lebovitz flew to Anchorage a few weeks ago to collect her sister's ashes, try to make contact with Nina's children and learn more about what had happened. She drove all over town, reconstructing her sister's final months and weeks: A stay at Sullivan Arena, a hospitalization for an infection, a spell spent with a boyfriend, staying in a parked car.

She talked to the detective handling her sister's case and left feeling like the death could have been prevented. He told her surveillance video from a nearby business had captured the collision: "Basically my sister had gotten halfway across the street on Tudor," where there is a raised median, Tawny said. "When she stepped off the second half, she hadn't checked again and the gap was too small."

Tawny tracked down some recent friends of Nina who told her that her sister had been crossing the road to get cigarettes. The crash had happened at 8:30 p.m., an hour past sunset. Tawny drove down Tudor Road herself, to see the scene.

"You have a church, a homeless shelter that gives out food, and (on the other side of the road), a gas station and nature," Lebovitz said. "Of course people are going to cross the street there. They are homeless, they probably don't have a car. Why hasn't anybody had the logic to put a crosswalk there?"

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Decades of work

The Tudor Road corridor between Lake Otis Parkway and roughly Piper Street has long been one of the most dangerous in the state for pedestrians.

Traffic engineers have been working for decades to make the stretch safer and less congested, with mixed results.

The Tudor Road section has “an increased crash rate and a higher than acceptable fatal rate for pedestrian crashes,” said Scott Thomas, regional traffic engineer with the Department of Transportation.

Back in 2000, Tudor was also the single busiest road in Anchorage, with up to 50,000 cars per day. A sequence of projects around 2005-2008 reduced the traffic flow significantly — now the traffic load in the area is more like 35,000 cars per day, about the same as Dimond Boulevard.

The advent of a traffic light at Piper Street was meant to stop pedestrians from darting across the road. That didn’t always work. Then, installation of a raised median was meant to give crossing pedestrians “refuge” amid lanes of traffic.

“We still want pedestrians to cross at the intersection, but we recognize they don’t” all the time, Thomas said.

The median helped but didn’t eliminate the deaths.

“I think the crash patterns have decreased, but they’re still there,” Thomas said.

The newest effort to improve safety in the area is a major lighting project, slated to begin in 2021. The project should double the light levels in the area, Thomas said. Five other problem areas for pedestrian crashes, including a section of Muldoon Road and the intersection of Minnesota Drive, Benson Boulevard and Northern Lights Boulevard, are also on the list for lighting improvements.

The state is always in discussions with the city about how to make roads safer, Thomas said.

“All these sites have higher speeds, higher volumes (of use) and higher crashes,” he said.

Thomas said he was saddened to hear of the pedestrian deaths this fall, before the lighting project could get started.

“This is the very thing we’re trying to prevent,” Thomas said.

‘We can expect recurrences’

On one side of Tudor Road is the Anchorage Gospel Rescue Mission, which offers services to homeless individuals. On the other is a Holiday superstation, and a short street that leads to the Campbell Creek greenbelt.

At the Gospel Rescue Mission, pastor John LaMantia and his staff warn clients not to cross the street, with four lanes of traffic zooming by. People do it anyway, seeking a shortcut; the nearest light with a crosswalk is a block to the east at Piper Street, or several blocks to the west at Lake Otis Parkway.

To stop the deaths, something needs to change, he said.

“Unless the state determines there should be a traffic signal installed, or perhaps alternatively, a skybridge, we can expect recurrences of what we’ve seen previously.”

The spot has taken too heavy a toll over the years, said Rivera, an Anchorage Assembly member who represents Midtown. There are some good ideas, he said, about how to fix the problem: a new crosswalk, a new traffic light at the intersection or possibly a pedestrian bridge.

There are several potential issues: Tudor Road is a state road, not a municipal road.

“You typically don’t see the muni ponying up dollars to fix state roads,” Rivera said.

With the city deluged in the fallout of the pandemic, an ongoing homelessness crisis and other issues, Rivera still thinks preventing pedestrian deaths is worth prioritizing. He plans on talks with municipal departments and state legislators to chart a “realistic path,” he said.

“It would be great if we could tackle some issues that have lingered for so long and just figure out a solution to get these done,” he said.

Deadly fall

Pedestrian deaths in Anchorage, a city dominated by cars, are not uncommon. Every year for the last decade, between two and 10 people on foot have been killed in collisions with vehicles in the city, according to data from the Anchorage Police Department.

Fall 2020 saw an unusual string of pedestrians deaths in Alaska’s biggest city. Within two months, six people were killed on Anchorage roads: On Aug. 25, a local musician named Peter Ettinger died at Tudor Road and C Street when a pickup hit him while he crossed against the light in a crosswalk.

The next five victims were all women. On Sept. 19, Johanna Rose Luke and Deborah Nelson were struck by an SUV and killed together, where A Street meets 32nd Avenue in Midtown. An online fundraiser for Nelson described her family as “saddened and shocked by this tragic and unexpected loss.”

On Sept. 23, Carolyn Nick was struck and killed by two teenagers driving in the area of Brayton Drive in South Anchorage. They drove away, leaving her body in the street but were later caught by officers, according to police. A family friend said Nick was originally from Kwethluk and had lost both parents as a teenager.

Lebovitz was struck the next week, on Sept. 30.

On Oct. 25, Jenneen Leopold was hit and killed in the very same spot, where Tudor Road meets Wright Street.

Eight pedestrians have died this year, including Lillian Pete, a 55-year-old who was struck on Jan. 22 near Dimond Boulevard and Old Seward Highway and died in a hospital in February, and a still unidentified man killed on Feb. 9 shortly after he was “reported stumbling on the shoulder of the Glenn Highway” early in the morning, according to police. More than nine months later, police have not been able to notify family of his death and have thus not released his name, according to police spokesman MJ Thim.

Under investigation

Why do collisions happen so frequently in Anchorage? And what can be done to stop the deaths?

The reasons for pedestrian-vehicle collisions are complex, and generally involve a long investigation to determine fault and whether criminal charges are warranted, said Lt. P. Scott Roberts, head of the Anchorage police traffic unit.

The recent incidents “are all still under investigation,” Roberts said. “It would be speculation to say it was a pedestrian or driver error.”

Sometimes both driver and walker contribute to the collision — a driver going too fast, or distracted by a phone, combined with a person stepping into the roadway at the wrong moment.

In most cases, the driver who has hit a pedestrian stops at the scene and ultimately isn’t found criminally culpable for the death, Roberts said. This year, only the death of Carolyn Nick involved a hit-and-run that has led to a serious criminal charge.

Pedestrian deaths tend to peak in the fall, when the long daylight hours of summer give way to dark nights without snowfall. According to 2009-2019 data supplied by APD, October is the peak month for vehicle-pedestrian deaths. State data also indicate that fall -- October and November -- is when pedestrian deaths peak, likely due to darkness and reduced visibility.

Thomas said this fall, he also nearly hit a pedestrian who walked through moving traffic.

“I had a very close call with a pedestrian who dashed between two signals” on a busy Anchorage road, he said. “The only reason he didn’t get hit was we could see what he was doing, barely.”

Police are unwilling to connect pedestrian deaths generally to Anchorage’s homeless population, or to say whether the victims in this year’s collisions were unhoused.

“We don’t know the extent of that,” Roberts said.

This fall, with pedestrian deaths mounting, the unit Roberts took over in June took the unusual step of fanning out to intersections with high foot traffic to warn people that walking into the road is deadly. They visited Benson and C Street, Northern Lights and C Street and Tudor Road, all areas where concentrations of people can often be seen gathering on corners and sidewalks.

[As Anchorage struggles with homelessness, outdoor deaths occur regularly — but with little public notice]

Officers told people “this is serious, this is dangerous, crossing the road illegally has some serious consequences,” Roberts said. Most seemed receptive. During what Roberts describes as “education and enforcement,” police cited a few people for jaywalking.

There have been no pedestrian fatalities since the death of Leopold, in October. Illuminating snow is on the ground now, but in cold weather there are still pedestrians to watch for in roadways all over town.

Tawny Lebovitz is back in California, missing her sister and hoping someone will make Tudor Road safer.

“Could this have been prevented?” Tawny said. “Yes, my sister was responsible for not looking up (as she crossed the road) — if you’re living in the shoes she was, are you perfectly concentrated on your life? If you’re homeless?”

“The woman who hit my sister is going to live with trauma too,” she said. “Now my sister is dead. Two people suffer.”

About this Author

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